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Traditional knowledge of basketry practices in a Northeastern region of Portugal

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Only few ethnobotanical surveys in Europe have focused on plants used for basketry and related activities (e.g. Musacchio and Barone Lumaga 2003; Salerno, Guarrera, and Caneva 2005; Vallariello 2003). In the Iberian Peninsula (Portugal and Spain), basket making has been studied by ethnographers and archaeologists, and some general and regional works have been done (e.g. Cano Herrera 1987; Gelabert et al. 1990; Kuoni 1981; Sánchez Sanz 1982, 1994). The variety of these handicrafts, the way they are elaborated and decorated reflects the idiosyncrasy of each region. However, it is a relevant field of research for ethnobotanists, being the study of the art of basketry not only of interest as part of a rich traditional heritage, but also of interest as a handicraft activity that can improve the incomes of rural people (Pardo-de-Santayana and Gómez Pellón 2003).

The aim of this paper is to study the plants species and techniques used for basket making and its social context, in rural communities of the Natural Park of Montesinho, in north-eastern Portugal.

The study area

The Natural Park of Montesinho (Fig. 1) is a natural protected area corresponding to the northern part of Bragança and Vinhais' municipalities, included in the mountainous Portuguese north-eastern region of Trás-os-Montes so-called "Nordeste Transmontano", a very isolated rural area, with small villages (most of them less than 100 inhabitants) scattered all over the landscape. The local economy is based on small farming systems, with an important crop production diversity (e. g. forestry, livestock, cereals, chestnuts, potatoes, homegardens), a high level of subsistence strategies, and mostly affected by agriculture abandonment and both population ageing and erosion, due to several migratory flows.

Methods

This topic emerged from an ethnobotanical research project carried out in this region, where we have been collecting and documenting plants, uses and tasks for almost four years (2000-2004). Using non-structured interviews as well as participant observation, during all seasons of the year, we were able to gather information about basketry and plaited crafts, from 45 informants (27% men and 73% women), between 26 and 93 years old, living in 25 villages. The frequency of citation and the Informant Consensus Factor (Trotter and Logan 1986 index, the ratio between the number of use-reports minus the number of taxa used and the number of use-reports minus one) were established.

Results and discussion

Basketry knowledge

Baskets and other woven or plaited artefacts (e. g. shepherd raincoats, hats, brooms, strings, mats) are used since a long time. Archaeological rests of baskets and other things made of esparto grass are known from the bat cave (Cueva de los Murciélagos) in the Granada province, 3500 years BC (Kuoni 1981).

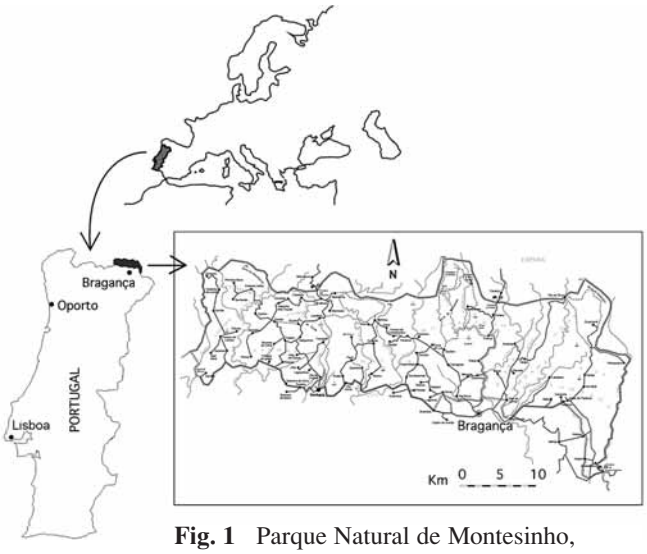

Fig. 1 Parque Natural de Montesinho, Bragança, Portugal. Map showing the protected area, principal villages, rivers and main mountain roads.

All the people interviewed were acquainted with the main uses of basketry, the elaboration techniques, the local nomenclature or with the plants more frequently employed, although only 48% of them are/were weavers, and a few of them are/were regarded as experts by their neighbours.

Considering the general knowledge of these craftspeople, both men and women know the local weaving techniques and associated practices (plant-based material, how to harvest, to process or to preserve, types of weave, colouring matter, decorations). However, there is a gender bias emerging from the different sex roles and traditional skills or tasks, as some woven items or raw materials are only manufactured by men, for instance, thatched roofs, raincoats, baskets for keeping cereal grains or for harvesting grapes, plaited containers for oxcart, covered jugs, cane furniture or some materials from chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) and ash trees (*Fraxinus angustifolia*). Women usually are able to perform many craft objects made of thin strips of material that bends and twists easily, for example brooms' steams (*Genista florida* and *Cytisus multiflorus*) or branches from the willow family trees (e.g. *Salix atrocinerea* or *Salix neotricha*). This basket work division between genders is closely connected to male or female perceptions, household goals and farming priorities; deals also with the assignment of the hardest (most physical) work to men. Mainly, women look after the family and keep the house and the homegarden while men take care of the crops, the animals and the forested areas, and go hunting or fishing. Basket making is especially adapted to their related needs and purposes. Nevertheless, this is not a general statement, because sometimes both men and women are able to employ different basic materials or techniques, without making any distinction between soft or tough raw materials and delicate objects or heavy artefacts.

Globally, the skills required are/were transmitted through generations, from parents to children, by verbal narration simultaneous with practise. Female neighbours frequently exchange among them experiences, beliefs and acquisitions, as they are used to share common interests and skills more often than men do. Basket making, like other female activities, is an attractive reason for women to spend some time together.

Nowadays, the weaving techniques, as well as some of the woven objects tend to disappear. The principal reasons are the abandonment of traditional farming, the old people incapacities or the partial adoption of modern materials such as plastic.

New social and environmental alternative activities in rural areas, such as agro ecotourism, handicraft exhibitions or workshops and craft fairs, are increasing the interest of younger generations which face the old weaving techniques with an innovative behaviour, and adopt new models, shapes, motifs, significances and uses.

Plants used for basketry and plaited crafts

The number of species reported is 28, included in 13 botanical families (Table 1). The Informant Consensus Factor is high in general (> 0.9) suggesting that the reported species are widely used. Moreover in the subcategory brooms there are more different plant-based material used than in other (e.g. baskets or mats), because brooms vary a lot in size, shape, and in smoothness or hardness.

Species more frequently cited, are those related with straw (e.g. *Secale cereale, Triticum aestivum*), wood strips (e.g. *Castanea sativa, Fraxinus excelsior*) or rods weaving techniques (e.g. *Cytisus multiflorus, Salix neotricha, Genista florida*) (Fig. 2). These woody species are similar to those reported in other Mediterranean countries, for instance Spain and Italy (Kuoni 1981; Ramiro Gutiérrez et al. in this volume; Vallariello 2003). Some are employed for several purposes in basketry but also in other categories of use, like medicine, food, agro management or fodder.

Rye, wheat, rushes (*Rubus* spp.) and alder tree (*Alnus glutinosa*) are the plants that provide raw materials for a higher number of different objects (Fig. 2). Basketry using cereal straw was very important for making "escrinhos", special containers from different sizes and shapes. The alder tree was commonly used in the NW of the Iberian Peninsula for waving flat baskets, usually used for transporting or containing fishes.

The use of *Cytisus multiflorus* and *Genista florida* for fine basket making and brooms of *Mentha* x *gentilis* and *Satureja hortensis* has not been referred before, according to the references surveyed. Finally, shepherds' raincoats made of *Juncus effusus* are one the most creative crafts of the region, a tradition that was also common in some Spanish regions (Kuoni 1981).

Table 1. Basketry and plaited artefacts: families and species, frequency of citation (FC) and main uses

FAMILIES and SPECIES	FC	MAIN USES OF PLANT-BASED MATERIALS
ASTERACEAE		
Arctium minus	2	little baskets, toys for children
BETULACEAE		
Alnus glutinosa	23	baskets; oxcarts containers; cane furniture
Corylus avellana	3	ties, strings
CAPRIFOLIACEAE		
Sambucus nigra	9	brooms, used only for removing aside the embers in the wood ovens, before putting inside the bread for baking
CISTACEAE		
Cistus ladanifer	18	brooms, specifically for cleaning wood ovens, before being used for cooking
FABACEAE		
Adenocarpus complicatus	6	yard brooms
Cytisus grandiflorus	2	hard brooms used outside the houses (never inside)
Cytisus multiflorus	27	coloured and decorated baskets, several weaving techniques; soft brooms, mainly used inside the houses
Cytisus scoparius	13	hard brooms used always outside the houses
Cytisus striatus	6	hard brooms used always outside the houses
Dorycnium pentaphyllum	5	little brushes for dusting the ashes from just baked bread
Genista florida subsp. *polygalaephylla*	23	coloured and decorated baskets, several weaving techniques employed; brooms with long handles
FAGACEAE		
Castanea sativa	43	resistant baskets for carrying land produces; covered jugs; homegardens gathering baskets
JUNCACEAE		
Juncus effusus	12	shepherd rain coats; baskets; mats
LAMIACEAE		
Mentha x gentilis	9	little brushes for watering flour, while preparing bread or cuscus
Satureja hortensis	2	little brooms for cleaning the traditional fireplaces
OLEACEAE		
Fraxinus angustifolia	21	oxcart containers; cane furniture
Phillyrea angustifolia	6	yard and cellar brooms
POACEAE		
Hordeum vulgare	2	baskets for storing cereal grains, bread or dough
Secale cereale	33	baskets for storing cereal grains, bread or dough; hats, strings; mats
Triticum aestivum	30	baskets for storing cereal grains, bread or dough; hats; mats
ROSACEAE		
Rosa corymbifera	11	baskets and mats, epidermis strings for plaiting, with other materials
Rubus ulmifolius	8	baskets and mats, epidermis strings for plaiting, with other materials
SALICACEAE		
Populus nigra	7	oxcart containers
Salix atrocinera	20	baskets, several shapes and motifs, rods with bark or peeled
Salix neotricha (*S. fragilis*)	25	baskets with plaited motifs, soft red-yellow rods; strings
Salix salviifolia	20	baskets, several shapes and motifs, rods with bark or peeled
SANTALACEAE		
Osyris alba	5	brooms for fireplaces or wood ovens

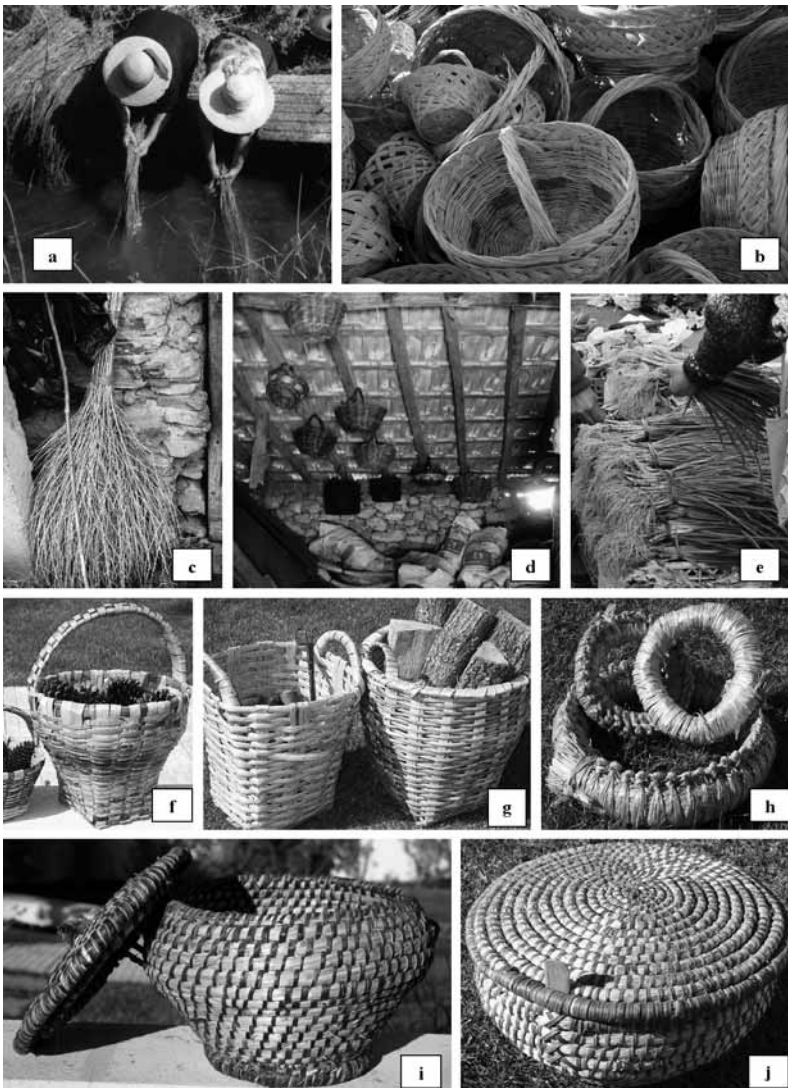

Fig. 2 Baskets and plaited artefacts from the Natural Park of Montesinho (Portugal).
a – Rye and wheat straw hats usually wore by women; **b –** Delicate basketry of thin peeled steams from *Cytisus multiflorus*, *Genista florida* or herbaceous steams of willow, used at home or in homegardens; **c. –** Brooms from *Cytisus scoparius*; **d –** Willow family tree unpeeled rods made into baskets with different shapes and size employed for eggs and for homegarden produces; **e –** Twisted strips of willow (*Salix* spp.) used for tying in a bundle; **f. –** Baskets wove with chestnut and bramble bark strips; **g –** Chestnut strips large baskets to use during harvest time or to store potatoes, grapes or firewood**;** **h –** Rye straw woven into round bases for standing and resting traditional copper or iron pots; **i and j** – *Escrinhos* made of rye, barley or wheat straw plaited with bramble (*Rubus ulmifolius*) or wild roses (*Rosa corymbifera*) bark strips.

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